



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

**‘The Smallest Agents of Transformation’: Animal Creatures in Grace Wells’ and Antía  
Otero’s Poetry**

Helena González Doval

Titora: Manuela Palacios González

Grao en Lingua e Literatura inglesas

Ano académico 2017-2018



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Autora

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Asdo. Helena González Doval

*A miãa avoa e a meu pai.*

*(...) Recordareime*

*aínda que plantar na horta  
sexa o mais próximo que estivese a comungar coas mans  
rezando entre sulfato turquesa  
mentres bato no peito  
e repito tres veces como Scarlet O'Hara:  
avoa, aquí a oración, aquí a terra...  
prometo que non a cagarei, non a cagarei*

*Antía Otero*

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CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

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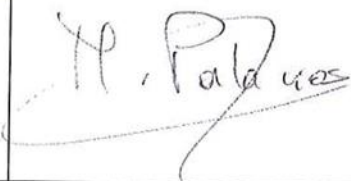

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

<b>Título:</b> <b>'The smallest agents of transformation': Animal Creatures in Grace Wells' and Antía Otero's poetry.</b>
<b>Resumo</b> [na lingua na que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]
<p>The aim of this project is to examine animal creatures in Grace Wells' poetry. Her work will be compared with that of the Galician writer Antía Otero, as both deal with similar subjects and are framed in two historically and culturally related contexts: Ireland and Galicia. Although this study will use the whole poetry production by both authors, particular attention will be paid to Grace Wells' book <i>Fur</i> and Antía Otero's <i>O cuarto das abellas</i>.</p> <p>My aim is to analyse the conception of the environment and the exploration of human relationships with nature. Such relations lead to a dichotomy between the wild and the domestic that is present in these poets' writing. Moreover, as they are both women writers, I aim to emphasize the role of women facing that dualism. I will analyse how the use of animal creatures may in part symbolize the 'othered' and 'oppressed' situation of both women and nature as a result of an anthropocentric and androcentric ideology dominating Western culture. Thus, special consideration will be paid to the transformation that those conceptions entail for current literary imaginaries.</p> <p>Concerning the methodology for this study, I will use literary criticism focusing on poetry theory. This includes</p>

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Ecocriticism examined by authors such as Grey Garrad or Eóin Flannery, whose *Ireland and Ecocriticism* (2016) will provide an approach to Ecoriticism in the Irish context. Moreover, theory related to Animal Studies and Terry Gifford's ideas on the Pastoral will be used to carry out this study. Finally, Feminist theory will also be crucial for this analysis through the ideas of authors such as Greta Gaard and Ynestra King on Ecofeminism.

Santiago de Compostela, 8 de Novembro de 2017.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this dissertation is to examine and compare the use of animal creatures in Grace Wells' poetry collections *Fur* (2015) and *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things* (2010) and Antía Otero's *O cuarto das abellas* (2016). Though born in England, Wells has lived in Ireland for many years and Otero is a Galician poet. It is important to mention this information considering that Ireland and Galiza have had a parallel development of their social and historical contexts, a fact that has stimulated similarities in their respective literary traditions. These two Atlantic communities have been depicted as Arcadias by the national discourse and, in both cases, the natural landscape works as a symbol for national identity (Palacios and Nogueira 185). However, the ongoing environmental crisis has caused significant changes in the way authors configure nature. Bucolic representations such as those of Yeats, in the case of Ireland, or those of the Galician writer Otero Pedrayo, have given way to a more critical approach that includes the denunciation of the degradation of nature. Then, how do writers react before the damage of an element that represents them as subjects and as a nation? Ecocriticism's aim is to answer this question. However, this dissertation is particularly intended to examine the work of women writers, Wells and Otero in this case, and their attitudes in the face of the environmental crisis. For this purpose, the theoretical framework will include the examination of two academic and social movements, ecocriticism and ecofeminism, as well as the examination of other notions such as othering, pastoralism and post-pastoralism and transformation, a fundamental objective of ecofeminism.

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation has been elaborated within the frame of the research project "Ecofictions: Emergent Discourses on Women and Nature in Galicia and Ireland". (MINECO-FEDER FEM2015-66937-P)



Firstly, Wells and Otero make use of what is called ecopoetry, that is, they attempt to make the reader aware of a profound change within contemporary attitudes towards the non-human world. Those are anthropocentric attitudes that include humans' consideration of the environment as a mere resource to use for their own capitalist interests in contemporary Western society. As explained by Borthwick, ecopoetry seeks to interrogate "the human position in respect of the environment (...) Its ethic is to oppose the violent assumption that the world around us exists merely as a set of resources which can be readily and unethically exploited and degraded for economic gain" (in Flannery 56). Therefore, writing about nature has become more than a mere descriptive work as it deals with humans' intense and often destructive relationship with the environment.

As both authors respond to the idealization of nature, their work will be studied in terms of post-pastoralism, a new literary genre that, as a response to pastoralism, focuses upon nature in contrast to the urban world, sometimes representing the material or social reality and entailing an ecological concern. For that matter, Terry Gifford points out that post-pastoralism "moves from the anthropocentric viewpoint of the pastoral, conveying a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things and recognizing that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (Gifford 129).

Besides, Wells' and Otero's work will also be studied in terms of ecofeminism as the poetic personae in their compositions are mainly women asking for changes. Ecofeminism deals with the links between women and nature as it recognizes the environment as a feminist issue and points out the interrelation between social domination and the domination of the natural environment. As explained by Greta Gaard, this domination implies a series of inequalities that have culminated into the double oppression of both women and nature: "(...) ecofeminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to

understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns” (Gaard 5). It is also asserted by ecofeminism that, in opposition to men’s association with reason, women have been related to irrationality, the uncontrolled and the wild. Therefore, as agents from the othered natural world, animals are also oppressed subjects by the anthropocentric discourse. For this matter, Scholtmeijer argues that “the otherness of women from an androcentric perspective finds a correlate in the more radical otherness of the animal from an anthropocentric perspective” (Scholtmeijer 232) and ecofeminism’s objective is to end all kinds of oppression.

The oppression of both animals and women may be the reason why Wells and Otero include animal creatures in their ecofeminist poetry. Since the emergence of the ecofeminist movement coincides with the emergence of women writers in Ireland and Galiza with an ecological concern, this dissertation intends to analyse the work of two of those female voices. Wells and Otero show in their compositions different configurations of nature, challenging the pastoral tradition and the utilitarian consideration of nature as symbol of national identity, and refer to animal creatures which act as powerful allegories that produce an ecological and feminist critique.

The dissertation is divided into three main chapters. The first one examines the role of animal creatures in Grace Wells’ collections *Fur* (2015) and *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things* (2015). This section includes a theoretical approach to ecocritical and ecofeminist theories applied to the Irish context. The second chapter is devoted to Otero’s *O cuarto das abellas* (2016), where particular attention will be paid to the Galician literary tradition in terms of ecocriticism and ecofeminism and to the function of animal creatures, bees in this case, as powerful symbols for matriarchy and endurance. Finally, the last section aims to compare Grace Wells’ and Antía Otero’s works. On the

basis of the similarities between Ireland and Galiza in historical, social and literary terms, and on the emergence of women writers in the last decades in these two Atlantic communities, this last chapter intends to examine the configurations that Otero and Wells make of the natural world from an ecofeminist perspective.

## **2. Animal creatures in Grace Wells' poetry**

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of animal creatures in Grace Wells' poetry collections *Fur* (2015) and *When God Has Been Called Away to Greater Things* (2010). Grace Wells was born in London in 1968 and has lived in Ireland since 1991, a fact that has been crucial to her literary production. Both poetry books deal with the complexity of human relationships with nature, and pay special attention to animal creatures. Just as the author's exploration of the intimate is intrinsically attached to the mythical, animal references work as allegories that arouse an ecocritical and an ecofeminist outlook. Those animal creatures perform the role of articulators in Wells' poems and, as agents and subjects from nature, they appear as representatives of the environment as well as guides for women to abandon the oppressive situation created by a capitalist and anthropocentric society.

Grace Wells' poetry is rendered as a powerful tool to transform Western society and, led by animal creatures, this process of transformation becomes the uppermost motif in Grace Wells' compositions.

### **2.1 Ecopoetry, ecocriticism and ecofeminism: a theoretical approach**

In the task of transformation, poetry operates as a translator of complex twenty-first century human relations between the local and the global, the social and the ecological, between perception and imagination. The objective of what has been named as ecopoetry is thus to engage the reader with the implications of a profound change within contemporary attitudes towards the non-human world. Those are, according to

Borthwick, violent attitudes that include humans' consideration of the environment as a mere resource to use for their own capitalist interests in contemporary Western society:

The central concern of ecopoetry is recognition of human entanglement in the world. It explores the relationship that humans have with a shared world, at once connected to it, but also increasingly estranged from it. Ecopoetry seeks to question and renegotiate the human position in respect of the environment in which we are enmeshed. Its ethic is to oppose the violent assumption that the world around us exists merely as a set of resources which can be readily and unethically exploited and degraded for economic gain. (in Flannery 56)

As ecopoetry explores the relation between humans and the natural world in contemporaneity, it can be used as a tool to approach emotional responses to climate change:

emotions are at least as important as rationality for decision making, on personal as well as institutional levels. This suggests that the obstacles to developing more sustainable societies are as much affective as scientific and political (Garrad and Lidström 35-36).

Therefore, following Garrad and Lidström's explanation, sustainability would no longer be exclusively based on scientific and political procedures but, representing the ultimate expression of poetry, emotions are also a necessary input to be included in the realization of environmental sustainability.

According to the definition and intentions of ecopoetry, the collections *Fur* and *When God Has Been Called Away to Greater Things* may become instruments for environmental politics. In order to interpret Wells' texts it is necessary to make an overview of ecocritical theory as the poems depict the natural world as an impaired scenery damaged by a contradictory capitalist discourse. Hence, writing about nature has become more than a mere descriptive work: it deals with the tensions between us and our environment, our intense and often destructive relationship with it and our struggle to understand that we are not simply observers but active agents whose actions have an impact on the natural environment. Moreover, as mentioned above, in Wells' work, the

Irish natural landscape is extremely meaningful for the interpretation of her poems as they fully come out of the land and from living in a rural place. As she explains,

I have been deeply immersed in the Irish landscape for many years and this has really been a voice that has come through me. In Ireland it is still possible to hear the wild, and hear the voice of the land. This is partly because the country has a small population and there are a lot of rural places where the voice of the land is louder than the voice of the human realm. (Wells 2018)<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand Wells' response to the mere idealization of nature, it is necessary to refer to the notion of 'the pastoral' since the idea of nature as a simple object to be described has its origins in pastoral tradition. Typical of the seventeenth century, the pastoral "pertains to a literary genre, dramas or poems, that referred to a specific form in which supposed shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with (mostly) idealised descriptions of countryside" (Gifford 1). However, the idealized nature depicted by the pastoral has been transformed by the inclusion of approaches that question human actions that damage the environment, such as industrialization, massive urbanization or de commodification of landscape.

Although reality changes and the literary 'pastoral' trope prevails, the way writers configure that trope is now being modified: the environmental movement is producing a revival of interest in the writing of new pastoral literature, particularly affected by human awareness of the precariousness of our relations with nature. In "Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Meets Ecocriticism", Glen Love accounts for a "new interpretation of the pastoral considering our grown awareness of profound threats to the environment" (Love 6). This new genre has been developed to include an urban audience, focusing upon nature in contrast to the urban world, sometimes representing the material or social reality and entailing an ecological concern. In this regard, Terry Gifford differentiates two

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<sup>2</sup> Reproduced with the author's permission, this information (Wells 2018) was compiled in private correspondence between the dissertation's author and Grace Wells.

developments of the pastoral tradition, providing a critique of the convention: the anti-pastoral and the post-pastoral. The latter

describes works in which the retreat serves to prompt the reader to the urgent need for responsibility and action on behalf of the environment. “Post-pastoral” moves from the anthropocentric viewpoint of the pastoral, conveying a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things and recognizing that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature (Gifford 129).

On the basis of the latter information, Grace Wells’ work may be studied in terms of post-pastoralism. In her poems, the author demonstrates a need of disconnection from a heterogeneous urban world that dilutes identity, not only as a human being but also as a woman in a patriarchal society. Wells also seems to fit in with Lawrence Buell’s definition of the post-pastoral as a “a type of writing that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city rather than the specific set of obsolescent conventions of the original literary form” (in Gifford 23). Hence, Grace Wells’ poetry may be construed as a new and more complex way of understanding nature in contemporaneity by incorporating an awareness of environmental threat, as well as of nature as an entity in its own right.

### **2.1.1 An ecofeminist perspective**

Besides the ecocritical outlook, Wells’ compositions may also be studied from an ecofeminist perspective. The poetic personae in her poems are women asking for changes because their lives have been marked, like the environment, by the the anthropocentric way of life of Western culture. The author herself explains the importance of women as poetic voices in her poems:

(...) it seems to me that all the poems relate somehow to how difficult it is to be a woman, and how I think women have powers and sensitivities, creativity and wildness that even we don’t really know about because the patriarchal world doesn’t really enable us to be fully free. (Wells 2018)

Therefore, Grace Wells' ecopoetry, engaged with the sustainable preservation of the natural environment, is intersected with feminist interests so as to vindicate women's rights in a patriarchal society.

Related in the poetic compositions, women and nature are two fundamental elements for ecofeminism. Based on various fields of feminist inquiry and activism such as "peace movements, labor movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements" (Gaard 1), ecofeminism deals with the links between women and nature as it recognizes the environment as a feminist issue and the interrelation of social domination and the domination of the natural environment. As explained by Greta Gaard, this domination implies a series of inequalities that have culminated into the double oppression of both women and nature:

(...) ecofeminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. For example, the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. (Gaard 5)

Thus, ecofeminism equates the liberation of women and the liberation of nature from anthropocentric considerations that control the Western world. Elements such as emotions and the body as an objectification have been historically related to the female and, at the same time, nature has also been objectified as something merely reproductive and idealized. In opposition to men's association with reason, women have been related to irrationality, the uncontrolled and the wild.

The latter connections have created roles that present women as fragile and inferior social subjects. Nonetheless, those positions were contested, specially in an age of a tremendous change as it was the Victorian *fin de siècle*. At that time, tradition was

challenged by the emergence of new revolutionary events in the artistic, scientific and political field. As pointed out by Greg Buzwell, women had an essential role in this task: “Arguably the most radical and far-reaching change of all concerned the role of women, and the increasing number of opportunities becoming available to them in a male-dominated world” (Buzwell). The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* represented a figure of emancipation, a heroine that was usually the object of satire, depicted as ‘de-sexed’, ‘mannish’ or ‘sexually voracious’.

The idea of women as irrational and wild animals relates them to the ‘uncontrollable’ natural world. For their part, as the gender in possession of rationality, men are incapable of controlling natural elements and react by objectifying and inferiorizing what they cannot control: nature and women in this case. Hence, women seen as irrational subjects within Western philosophy are considered as inferior animals.

For their part, the New Women fought against this attitude, and their legacy has been a blueprint and inspiration for contemporary feminist movements. Maureen O’Connor speaks of “a constructive link among systems of oppression that has come to be asserted by feminists in recent decades” (O’Connor 5). Ecofeminism links women’s rights with animal advocacy just like women’s inferiority has traditionally been alleged and justified by relating them to nature. The essential aim of ecofeminism is thus to analyse the dual modes in which the feminization of nature and naturalization/animalization of women served to justify the patriarchal domination of both women and the non-human world.

### **2.1.2 Women and animals as others**

In Grace Wells’ collections *Fur* and *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things*, subjects are women who usually merge or are transformed into animal creatures. By doing that, the equation between women’s and animal’s oppression is asserted; both are represented as the ‘others’ of a patriarchal and anthropocentric society. Women and



animals are seen as the ‘despised body’ and the abject, and are thus presented as the ‘others’ of the human world.

The process by which a subject is ‘othered’ implies an examination of the construction of the ‘other’ as anyone who is separate from one’s self. As Spivak explains: “humanity would (...) be manufactured into relative identity locations of ‘self’ and ‘other’— unequal and exploitative hierarchies of value sustained by, and that sustain, a patriarchal capitalist society” (in Flannery 60). In such a way, the discourse of power produces its subjects by generating some groups that are excluded. It creates a social hierarchy where one group, the privileged one, formed by upper- or middle-class, human, technologically and industrially "developed," male, dominates the othered group, considered as inferior and formed by poor or working-class, nonhuman animal, "undeveloped" nature, and female. In this sense, Scholtmeijer argues that “the otherness of women from an androcentric perspective finds a correlate in the more radical otherness of the animal from an anthropocentric perspective” (Marian 232) and ecofeminism’s objective is to end all kinds of oppression.

Literature, Scholtmeijer goes on to say, “gives material reality to otherness, and women’s narratives empower otherness by locating it securely in bodies, identities and worlds” (235). In the case of Wells’ collections, in order to face the self/other distinction, women subjects usually merge into animal creatures showing a metamorphosed and altered body, elements that allow the author to deal with the construction of subjecthood from a female perspective, giving a voice to the ‘others’ oppressed by Western culture. As bodies of animals and women have historically been objectified and abused, it is important to analyse in Wells’ work animal creatures’ roles as a powerful imagery for transformation, the objective of every engaged literature. As O’Connor has explained, in the twenty-first century “we find Irish women writers and artists deploying the landscape

and the natural not only as a gesture of resistance to the masculinist regulation of female energies, but also as a self-consciously elaborated stage for the performance of identity, so closely associated with the countryside” (O’ Connor 136). Therefore, using animal imagery, Grace reclaims a female space within landscapes historically defined by men.

## **2.2 An analysis of animal creatures in Grace Wells’ *Fur***

The aforementioned concerns will be developed in Grace Wells’ work through one of the main objectives of ecocriticism and ecofeminism: transformation. Donna.L Potts has suggested that “transformation has become one of the main motifs within post-pastoral tradition” (Potts 2) and Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy consider that transformation “may very well be the single term to which all adherents of ecofeminism would assent” (Gaard & Murphy 3). The book *Fur* is about a planet in need of transformation, a process that explores the human and non-human world. To do such an exploration, Wells divides the collection into five parts: ‘The Cultured World’, ‘Animal Encounters’, ‘Being Human’, ‘Becoming Animal’ and ‘Cornucopia’. Each section copes with the dualism nature/culture and invites the reader to look beneath dominant structures of power as they deal with the anthropocentric dichotomy that has linked male with reason, culture, the non-material, the rational and the abstract while women would be associated with nature, the material, the emotional and the particular.

In this regard, the subjects in charge of transformation and responsible for changing the aforementioned power structures based on anthropocentrism are animal creatures, which are the key elements to interpret Wells’ compositions. In a parallel manner, women’s construction of subjecthood is usually blurred in the poems as their merging into animals will render the “constructive link among systems of oppression in western society” (O’Connor 5) that ecofeminism seeks to explain and resolve.

This work is particularly devoted to the analysis of the presence, in Wells' poetry, of small animals that, contrary to the common association of wilderness and empowerment with big animals, the author uses as powerful images whose activities, though subtle, are accumulative and eventually effective. The first poem in the part 'The Cultured World' is named 'Achill' (13) and partly synthesizes Wells' poetic intentions:

It started on Achill, October  
and autumn light on the fern hills, mountains  
crowned in Paul Henry cloud.

I cycled beneath them energised,  
girlish as the heroine  
of a nineteen-fifties film.

At Dugort dolphins put on a private show,  
inland a kestrel allowed me  
follow her hunt through the marsh fields.

To the house a robin came each day  
tapping the window,  
insistent as a messenger.

There was something wrong  
about my nightly phone-calls home  
as if the island were just too far off

and I could no longer quite be reached.  
I kept company with gulls  
and oystercatchers, birds

braving the wild currents of air.

On Achill it is all about flight,  
anything insufficiently tethered breaks loose.

I could not read the portents,  
it is only now I know the unravelling  
began there— the salt breath

off the Atlantic and the lungs  
unable to harbour such freedom.  
I must warn you not to go there

unless you are able for that sea wind,  
unless you are ready to change your life.

This poem works as a baseline, a point of departure that summarizes and introduces the most important motives, symbols and themes in Wells' poetry. It begins by asserting that 'something' has started in Achill, the largest island off the coast of Ireland, situated in County Mayo. This first stanza reveals that something has changed in nature, particularly an Irish landscape. The poet herself has pointed to Ireland as her main source of inspiration:

So the main importance is that I am in a very close relationship to the earth itself—the land of Ireland, especially the field I live in, in Tipperary. I live on the side of a mountain called Sliabh na mBan (...) where I have been able to listen deeply to nature. I don't think I could have done that so easily in other parts of Europe (...) it's quite acceptable here to live in close communion with the spirit of a place. (Wells 2018)

As in the rest of the collection, in this poem nature is not idealized but described as a source of change and place for transformation, a fact that takes Wells' poetry away from the pastoral tradition and situates her work into a post-pastoral tendency that values nature

as an entity on its own right by vindicating that it is not only an instrument for capitalist investment or a resource to satisfy human consumerism.

Besides the post-pastoral outlook, the second stanza introduces a feminist perspective since a girl is portrayed as a heroine cycling energized in that landscape. Achill will thus work as an entry point for change and transformation as it provides power to women in their process of liberation. In this sense, some formal aspects, especially those concerning the semantic system, help to interpret the text. 'Achill' is a narrative poem where the author uses free verse and abundant enjambments. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* an enjambment is:

the running over of the sense and grammatical structure from one verse line or couplet to the next without a punctuated pause. In an enjambed line (also called a 'run-on line'), the completion of a phrase, clause, or sentence is held over to the following line so that the line ending is not emphasized as it is in an end-stopped line. ("Enjambment" 72)

Therefore, and according to this information, the fragmentation of the sense and syntax of the poetic units is probably used by the author to emphasize a particular idea. Consequently, the broken syntax in 'Achill' may refer both to a situation that needs to be rethought and to someone who needs to be liberated or renewed: 'it is only now I know the unravelling / began there— the salt breath' (13).

In general terms, the poem is about a woman portrayed as an empowered subject who, guided by small creatures, achieves freedom through natural elements in the Irish island of Achill. However, it is not until the third stanza that animal creatures are introduced as guides for transformation. These subjects are presented in the third, fourth and sixth stanzas as insistent elements that have an on the 'I' narrator. In 'Achill' (13), 'kestrels allowed', while the poetic voice 'follow(s) her hunt through the marsh fields', a 'robin came (...) insistent as a messenger', gulls, oystercatchers and birds 'kept company' with the poetic voice and brave 'the wild currents of air'. If we analyse the verbs or

adjectives that accompany the names of the animals, one may notice that they suggest movement (follow, come) or have positive connotations (allowed, insistent or keep company), which shows animals' will to encourage women to become active agents of change.

Furthermore, the reason why something has to be changed in the subject's life is suggested in the fifth stanza when the poetic voice claims that 'There was something wrong' and she 'could no longer quite be reached'. This suggests an urgent need to escape and leave a situation that, as referred to in line twenty, is solved in 'Achill', where 'it is all about flight' and where the poetic voice 'breaks loose'. It is more clear when in the eighth stanza she claims that the 'unravelling / began there' and Achill is thus rendered as the place where natural elements, as the wind or the mountains, set one free. Since a woman led by animal creatures is trying to gain freedom, which can only be achieved in nature, 'Achill' is a first step, a way to speak for a collective and give a voice to the others: nature and women in this case. As the author herself has pointed out, animals in her poetry are agents in need of a voice:

I think the animals are agents. Agents of different things. I think they come into my poems so often because I don't want the animals to be forgotten or taken for granted. They are so present here in our world around us, and yet more and more, I see human beings thinking in a human-centric way. We do not speak of animals much, they do not come into our television culture, or our theatre, and only sometimes in our films. Hardly ever in our music or our art. So I think they are agents of not-forgetting that we live in a world that is full of creatures as well as us, and that they need a voice. (Wells 2018)

To sum up, 'Achill' functions as a blueprint for transformation, energy and movement. It is that natural landscape what allows the unravelling and enables the girl to change her life, meaning her oppressed position as the other of western culture. Achill, as a natural entity, is thus an active participant for transformation. As the poet herself has pointed out:

there is a sense that a place makes a people, and that they are not separate from that place. I am very interested in that idea. David Abram says that a place is not a backdrop to human affairs but an active participant in them, and I believe that is true. Ireland, the land, has been an active participant in my work. (Wells 2018)

At the same time that Wells gives a voice to non-human agents, Wells also intends to give a voice to women. In his work *Ecocriticism*, Grey Garrad identifies a “gendered hierarchical distinction between wild and domestic animals in which the former are linked with masculine freedom, and often predation, while the latter are denigrated as feminine servants of human depredation” (Garrad 150). On the basis of this information, the use of animal creatures in Wells’ poetry may show the author’s interest in interrogating gendered roles through natural imagery and an alignment of women and animals. There exists a link between the representation of animals as ‘naturally consumable’ and the consideration of women as inferior utilitarian and mere reproductive entities. Transformation is therefore a process by which the othered agents, women and animals, gain a voice as abjected subjects.

Moreover, so as to leave the domestic world to which women have been confined, there is in Wells’ poems a continuous allusion to the opposite background, the wild. The wilderness represents a way to escape the human realm by disavowing the place where society expects women to stay, the domestic, and as a revolutionary action, a jump into the unknown and uncontrollable realm of the non-human. Grace Wells asserts that

I don’t really want to be in the human realm, my wildness would love to go off and be with the animals. And yes that must have something very much to do with being a woman, because our culture tames us so much that I don’t think we ever really have the chance to fully be our powerful selves. Our culture doesn’t want to see us in our power, but I think the foxes would welcome female wildness and power because it is what they already have. (Wells 2018)

The poem ‘Vixen’ (15), divided into five parts, deals with those othered entities, their relation to the wild and their exploration by female subjects. In the poem, the female

poetic voice tells the story of a vixen that completes her as human being: ‘brought us/ the part of our selves that wasn’t fully human’ and guides her to abandon the human realm to enter a ‘dark one’. This eagerness for change is clearly represented by the allusion to the ‘I Ching’, the book of mutation in Chinese Civilization and thus a reference to the motif of transformation.

The process of transformation is in this poem marked by a dark and wild atmosphere since wildness is what othered agents, the female poetic voice in this case, seek to explore. As Wells’ explains when talking about the meaning of the wilderness in her compositions: “Really I think I am fascinated by the wild. I love the wild beyond us, and the wild within us. And so the creatures are a bit of agents for exploring the wild” (Wells 2018). If we analyse the ways in which the vixen appears in the poem, we notice that the setting is always a dark one: ‘Out of winter’s blue-black ink she came. / Always at night. Withheld’ (15) and a sleekness hugging shadow // wildness, taken on form, to step into our yard’. Stepping into the yard is a way to suggest that the female protagonist is eager for transformation and, at the end of the poem, it is wildness that changes everything and makes her react. Therefore, the appropriation of wilderness as an atypical attitude and place for women alludes to the necessity to be re-born and to re-think identity. Women seek for identity emphasising with animals, agents that have equally suffered western culture’s forms of domination. Therefore, the notion of the body as a utilitarian place that patriarchal society has assumed, is reversed in the collection as Wells creates poetic personae that re-appropriate their own female bodies in a violent/wild/dark way, basically by merging into animals and thus re-affirming their subjectivity.

Just like the wild and dark atmosphere, the setting in *Fur* is also marked by mysticism. Using wildness and thus presenting female subjects as ‘uncontrollable’ ones may



represent a way to reject Catholic practices of female subordination. Wells talks about a strong spiritual suppression of women by the Catholic Church in Ireland:

There is also the fact that Catholicism still has a strong hold in Ireland, and that has forced me to be more political about the woman's voice. But having said that, there is also a strong ground-roots feminist spirituality here, spearheaded by a woman writer Mary Condon who wrote a seminal book in the 1980's *The Serpent and the Goddess*. (Wells 2018)

In the poems, the author treats nature as her own sanctuary and constantly alludes to mythical figures from the Celtic tradition. Consequently, official religious beliefs are displaced by the introduction of creatures, goddesses and landscapes that diverge from the Christian tradition and its oppressive practices upon women. Concerning the separation of man and women/animals, official religion can also be seen as producing a particularly pernicious construction of women and animals as 'others' to be used. This logic establishes a link with the field of religion since patriarchal theological values focus on the transcendence and domination of the natural world, fear of the body, projection of evil upon women and world-destroying spiritual views. As argued by Maureen O'Connor, "Christianity districts of the body, its renunciation of the sexual, is intensified in Catholic Church" (O'Connor 137).

Wells' rejection of Christian values explains her recurrence to the Celtic tradition, specially to mythical and spiritual figures. In 'Vixen' the author writes that the fox brought her the part of herself that wasn't fully human, and in another poem, 'Selkie Moment', she explores the same theme again but through myth: the myth of the seal-woman. Maureen O'Connor explains the role of the Selkie within Celtic tradition and points out that:

The selkies, a shape-shifter between seal and human form, the human form taken nearly always that of a woman (...) in Irish traditions, selkies stories frequently narrate attempts to police female sexuality, with dire consequences (...) the animal in Irish folklore functions as emissary between the human and the spirit realm, and is sometimes itself an enchanted being. (O'Connor 153-154)

‘Selkie Moment’ (18) presents a mythical creature that resembles a seal in the water but assumes human form on land. The poetic voice describes the process of transformation of a female subject into the mythic figure of the selkie. The changing process begins with a woman cutting her hair in the kitchen and seeking for the place ‘where he kept her pelt / beneath the dry earth of their barn’. After this statement, the changing process begins full of dark and wild elements. The fourth stanza refers to the woman as a subject with the pulse ‘gone’ alluding to the apparent silenced position of women in society. However, through an enjambed line, again reinforcing the main idea of change and empowerment, ‘but a claw still scratched // and the scratch called for salt and change’. Change is explicitly shown here and after this, the woman ‘put the skin onto her back // walked out into darkness’ and, finally, the transformation is completed ‘(...) Seal-headed, / swam beneath the myriad brilliant stars’. An allusion to transformation implying a natural element and the dark atmosphere maintains the mysticism that Celtic mythology provides and that the author aspires to keep in her poems.

The Selkie as both animal and woman reveals a strategy that will persist in the collection to represent a ‘split subject’. In this composition, there is a third person poetic voice, a ‘she’ that may be viewed as a type of split subject, a mark of the distinction between the ‘self’ and ‘other’ that merging into two historically denied identities could thus give a voice and empower them. The poet explains how the transformation is a way to liberate the woman subject from an oppressive love relationship:

In ‘Selkie Moment’, I’m able to become the seal woman, to make sense of the fact I am leaving my lover, and that I have to do it, not out of any rational, reasonable aspect of myself, but because some inner wildness is calling me to. An inner sea is calling me back to freedom, and the myth of the seal-woman explains that to me. (Wells 2018)

In Celtic traditions, animals are a fundamental element within the motif of transformation since they represent an entity in-between the human and non-human world. Once again, Maureen O'Connor's analysis explains Wells' usage of this type of Irish spirituality, explaining that in Celtic traditions there exists a relation of interdependence where women are given political and spiritual significance:

These writers incorporate mythic elements (...) in order to re-mythologize Irish experience, reaching back to the Irish tradition found in archaic narratives which represented (...) an interdependency of power between women and man, a conception of shared power grounded in a vision of the female body and the natural world with which it was closely associated as sacred; in other words, a social order in which women and the natural world were given political and spiritual significance. (O'Connor 158)

Therefore, Grace's insistent identification of women with animals seeks for a transvaluation of the animal that harkens back to traditions that, rather than denigrating powers of reproduction and regeneration, valued, respected and treasured both women and animals. Nonetheless, this relation of equality present in Celtic figures is also explored in other traditions, as the Wiccan<sup>3</sup>. In the last stanza of the poem 'Return of the Salmon' (Wells 26) a 'Horned God' appears. The 'Horned God' is a mythological figure in Wiccan belief that represents wilderness and sexuality as well as the union between the animal and the divine, being both the female Goddess and the male God. Therefore, the poetic personae could be claiming for equality by making use of other mythic figures or traditions as the Celtic or the Wiccan, thus seeking for alternatives for the Catholic one.

The allusion to other traditions is present in several compositions: 'Like Persephone Emerging from the Underworld' (32) is a narrative poem where a female character emerges 'like Persephone', a reference to Greek mythology through a Goddess, particularly the queen of the underworld and goddess of vegetation. The inclusion of

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<sup>3</sup> Wicca: a religion whose origins date back as far as 15,000 B.C and that was influenced by pre-Christian beliefs and practices of western Europe. It affirms the existence of supernatural power and of both male and female deities who inhere in nature and that emphasizes ritual observance of seasonal and life cycles.

Goddesses instead of a God when talking about religion is also alluded in 'The Forgetting' (54). The poem is the apology of a mother to her daughter and includes a description of many Goddesses (Maat, Themis, Athena or Artemis) that the child will have to forget because the 'Human world' imposes a religion that prays for a male God. The end of the poem is a suggestive, powerful and ironic act of resignation based on a strong critique to the Catholic patriarchal institution. It ends:

When you wake from this your tongue  
will no longer remember the old prayers,  
  
forgive me, but in this place you must do as they instruct,  
put your hand to your breast, here, here,  
  
repeat after me, father, son,  
Holy Ghost.

On page 94, 'Evening star', the spirit moves in the shapes of animals: whales, elephants, rhinos, seals and finally, 'rivers flowed with copper' (94), meaning by 'copper', as stated by the poetic personae, 'Venus, planet and Goddess both'. This short but powerful poem raises mystic issues and leads the readers to question their own beliefs. For the poetic personae, the Holy Spirit is a goddess, a woman that flows in a river. A critique of the religious convention that poses a man as the Creator is, from my point of view, suggested here at the same time that it rejects women's inferiorization and invisibility by equating them to a divine figure.

The second part of *Fur* is named 'Animal Encounters' and begins with the poem 'What have They done to Kilkenny' (23). Using an Irish toponym, Kilkenny, the author starts with an allusion to a bird, a cormorant with black wings that 'spread like a heraldic

crest'. The poetic voice presents a bride who 'grinned into the evening light' when a '(...) cormorant / lifted its wings above the weir'. Just after this, the poetic female voice adds that it was 'like it was me spreading the dark arms / of my wildness and, risen nude, dripping/ river mud, has stepped from water/ into a city where anything could happen next'. The poetic voice uses the image of a bride escaping the oppressive institution of marriage by merging into the dark wings of a cormorant, another reference to the wild and dark as part of the transformation process. At the end, the poetic voice also becomes a cormorant rising from the water, including a natural element as the starting point for change. Moreover, the poetic voice rises 'nude from the water, a symbol for pushing away skin, since taking off that 'human skin' would be a key step for leaving the cultured world and entering the non-human one.

Grace Wells herself explains the role of the bird as the figure that helped her to achieve her wildness and perception about what is to be wild and civilized. As Kilkenny, an Irish city, has become a place for hen parties in recent years, people there are truly close to their own wildness:

What they Have done to Kilkenny' is the first poem in the collection that shows me an animal that is an agent of transformation. Here it is the cormorant bird, which has spread its black wings above the weir in the middle of the city. Here the cormorant doesn't exactly change anything except perception. Through the bird I'm able to see my own wings, my darkness, my sexuality, again my wildness. Anything could happen next. I might do anything next because I am there in that city where there are a lot of hen and stag parties, and everyone is very close to their wildness. And yet its a city, we're all meant to be civilised. But the bird is this agent that allows me to perceive that no one in the city is really civilised, and neither am I. (Wells 2018)

Animal creatures appear again in 'Summer' (25) as messengers of hope. Hope, creativity and endurance: 'peacock butterflies', are 'waiting for me, on the path, on its very flagstone and butterflies'. In this poem a woman, the poetic voice, escaping patriarchal

oppression presents herself as ‘consumed’ because of the ‘house maintenance’ and the ‘chaos of children’. However, it is the natural part of the house, ‘the bottom of the garden’ where she steals ‘one small slip of time’. There, the poetic voice reveals ‘All I intend is / to write down’. Nature is thus presented as a refugee, a necessity to face the real cultured world that consumes ‘every good part of me’. Nature is also the suitable place for transformation in ‘Our Myth was a Garden of Eden’ (31). This poem shows women’s silence and resignation yet suggests a powerful change at the end: ‘I acquiesced / as women are wont to do / from pressure or compassion’. The female poetic voice identifies herself with Eve, and despite admitting her resignation as a woman, in the last stanza claims that: ‘and in the garden I was a snake / shedding a necessary skin’. Once again, a woman becomes an animal and a line break marks this mutation.

Animal creatures keep coming to female poetic voices in ‘Like Persephone Emerging from the Underworld’ (32) when ‘an insect lands on her lapel— a winged creature of white air’ and in the last stanza of ‘Otter’ (33), where the poetic personae finally follows those creatures into a wider world: ‘Black as eels but halo-bright they circled swimming / me into their carnival, into a wider world’. Just after that, she addresses women and mentions that ‘hope is only waiting for release’ and eager to achieve freedom through animal creatures warns that: ‘Pay attention, the signs gifted are subtle: small beads / for the necklace of faith we must thread for ourselves’.

In the poem ‘Animal Encounters’ (34), ants erupt into a women’s kitchen, in a dark black flood, ‘ant armies’ travel ‘like neurons / straight to my instinct, direct to murderous rage’. This time animal creatures penetrate the female subject’s neurons and, later in the poem she says that ‘All week I have been thinking / about animal encounters / the messages creatures bring’. Ants will thus here work as transmitters and in ‘Canvas’

black and white winged flocks of oystercatchers are 'poiting direction' with 'white arrows'.

In 'Canvas' (35) the poetic voice introduces the need of transformation in through healing. In fact, the healing process is a recurrent and signifiant theme in Wells' poetry as it refers to the neccessity of change, of 'curing' something that is wrong. However, after being guided by birds, the female subject 'turned charcoal, white, ultramarine'. Hence, the healing process symbolizes a type of purification that nature offers by transforming charcoal, another dark element to suggest the process as an act of rebellion.

Small creatures are also the protagonists in the poem 'Each Day the Queen Wasp Came' (36), where they 'came / buzzing their insistent daily drone, demanding / their abundance was a portent I should read' and talk to the poetic voice saying: 'Come // they whispered, it is time to over-winter. Be tenacious. / Live by the lamp of your own scent, Queen wasp, complete'. Animal creatures directly adress the woman, encouraging her to react and act and in 'Golden Scarab, Rose Chafer' (37), scarabs, as the insistent bees on the former poem, tap in the window calling for attention. Finally, it is only when a rose-chafer 'flied free' that the healing and thus liberation of the female character commences.

Still in the poem 'Golden Scarab, Rose Chafer' (37), the poetic voice compares herself with an 'insect in Jung's hand'. Jung is a psychoanalyst that argued how insects have affected the human psyche and in the poem, the female voice suggests that insects not only occupy her body, but have transcended to the psychological side. Animal creatures would thus be completed agents: not only a body but, as the book progresses, transformation includes mental processes and emotional merging into animals. Hence, this could be a way to reject conceptions of both nature and women as material elements, mere bodies to use at will. Finally, at the end of the poem animal creatures are explicitly

mentioned as ‘the smallest agents of transformation’. The poetic personae confesses that she ‘is never tired of its telling’ and that she is lit each time the ‘rose-chafer released into a room / whispering again that the language / of this world is amelioration’.

The fourth part of *Fur*, ‘Becoming animal’, includes a portrait of disillusion with the human world, a depressive atmosphere and a recurrence of dreams and nature as refuges. Especially, the notion of nature as a sacred place, suggesting its value and need for protection against an anthropocentric society, shapes up within this section. As it was mentioned before, nature in Wells’ poetry acquires mystic connotations and is thus associated with sanctuaries as they represent the spiritual peace that for Wells cannot be achieved in the chaos that the cultured world implies. In the poem ‘The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Wisdom’ (65) the poetic voice, referring to the anthropocentric world, claims that ‘There is a tempest where chaos / happens all the time,’ but asserts to be ‘back now’, meaning that she can only be liberated in nature, precisely on an island.

As the book advances, the intensity and the process of transformation is stronger. In ‘Pace’ (74) the voice goes to her favourite place, the woods. She speaks of ‘the forest pulling me deeper in’ and speaks of a strange agent that ‘turns out to be a fox’ or a wife that ‘after long years of marriage / proves to be a seal’. For her part, merged into animal creatures, the poetic voice alludes to the need of transformation and claims that: ‘Sometimes my need is to lie down beneath the pines, / to curl, heart to earth. / Only the breath, / only fur’. The poem includes a direct allusion to the title of the book that implies a change from human skin to fur, thus referring to the entrance into the natural world and abandonment of the ‘cultured’ one through animal elements such as fur.

Finally, the last section of *Fur* is named ‘Cornucopia’, a word that alludes to environmentalist critiques that nature is only valued in terms of its usefulness to human



beings. In the second poem within this part, 'The Egg Collection' (82), a progressive destruction of animals resembles the destruction of nature performed by humans that the title of this last part suggests: 'Only now I read some latest human caper / is souring the soil, destroying snails, / and the birds are lying unviable eggs'. Moreover, it metaphorically denounces both women's oppression and aggressions to nature. Animal creatures, unborn birds in this case, are again the protagonists of the poem and the first allusion to women is in fact the usage of eggs: 'what shimmers around these eggs / is not death but living wing' and finishes:

And though I know wren and eggs will never fly -  
I feel they do. Each time I pass them they gift me  
the spirit of light, the presence of bird after birth.

These lines refer to silenced women who seem to be death. However, they have wings and by comparing women with agents with the capacity to fly, the poetic voice may be suggesting the ability to set them free. The entangled issues of women and nature are suggested in the second stanza:

The smallest is no larger than my smallest nail,  
the seeds of pumpkins are not so small,  
yet furled birds break loose  
from just such eggs year after year.

Another significant element in this poem is the usage of 'seeds'. Seeds refer to a beginning, the birth of something. In the same way, transformation implies a rebirth, a search for an identity that does not include any kind of othering. Here, as unborn agents, eggs are linked with seeds as instruments with which transformation begins and an opportunity to rethink identity. In addition, the last words of the poem form a sound

repetition as the noun 'bird' resembles the verb 'birth', thus suggesting that new subjects will eventually be born, this time winged, which may mean liberated.

Women's communion with the natural world and its animal agents is in Wells' poems made through the body as a dual place where oppression and transformation take place. The title of the book, *Fur*, refers to this transformation, the identity (or lack of it) and subjectivity that the physical body represents. The body, as the 'colonized' utilitarian and 'reproductive place' that anthropocentric society has used at will for their own interest, is a major trope in Grace's poetry. The inclusion of animal creatures is a metaphor for the crossroad between the human and non-human world where female characters engage with the improper and irrational nature of their desire, which explains the dark atmosphere. Therefore, the achievement of wildness means to conquer the aspect which has been negated to women.

### **2.3 An analysis of animal creatures in Grace Wells' *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things***

*When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things* was published five years before the book *Fur*. While the main idea of *Fur* was the transformation of women due to the presence and intervention of animal creatures, *When God Has Been Called Away to Greater Things* focuses on the complexity of familial and love relationships. Although book collections share a direct relation to the mythical and a strong presence of female poetic voices, animal creatures do not have an essential role in the collection and their appearance is lesser than in *Fur*. However, this section will be devoted to the examination of the role and presence, yet limited, of animal creatures in *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things*.

It is particularly notable in this collection the presence of insects and the depiction of their actions as subtle or even invisible ('Invisible, the insect held within the amber of our father's boat (1)' (Wells 2010:19) as resembling the apparent indifference of women. The poem 'The Only Medicine' (31) includes a powerful stanza where a female poetic persona identifies herself with a trapped butterfly. Consequently, tired of chaos, her only medicine is writing and questioning the way humans treat nature. This is thus a way to introduce an ecofeminist critique at the same time that the author vindicates the place of women within the writer community and, in a wider sense, the work of the artist as a medicine both for themselves and to influence society.

The poem 'Nightwork' (18) presents another important motif for transformation: the dream. Dreams are the place where the poem's female subjects create the imaginary for transformation, deeply related to the unconscious. The author uses dreams as a place for confession, where repressed thoughts are shaped and trained to go up to the surface: 'Even asleep I try to make honey from your bees' where bees may represent a scar, the harm that someone has made to the poetic voice but also resistance since they came 'fuelling my tireless attempt / to make something of their Sting' (19-20). Bees had 'died, hive by hive', but 'reborned and returned 'scuttling, swarming panicked dreams'.

In 'Pioneer' (41), the poetic voice describes a woman who is 'loosely moored between two worlds, / anchored only by children'. However, she finally stands for the Natural as 'what flows in her now' are 'rainwater', 'woodsmoke' and her hair is 'snagged on briars'. Finally, creatures are 'roost in her thoughts', her days are measured by 'the pitched balance of wings breaking into flight' and the female protagonist ends up moving in 'feral ways'. Therefore, this poem visibly summarizes the struggle that female subjects have to face in Grace Wells' poetry collections. Both nature and animal creatures affect

women physically, through the changing process from skin to fur, and also mentally, as this last stanza asserts that creatures are roosted in the protagonists' thoughts.

Therefore, in Grace Wells' poetry, animal creatures are the subjects in charge of transformation. The poet herself has explained and summarized that in her work, animal creatures have the following roles:

Agents of not-forgetting  
Agents of wildness  
Agents of Freedom  
Representatives of the MythoPoetic  
Agents of transformation of perception  
Messengers from the Gods, and also the Gods themselves in animal form, or the part of the world soul that is visible to us through animal form.  
Mirrors that reveal the self in all its aspects. (Wells 2018)

From an ecofeminist point of view, animal creatures are Wells' way to give a voice to women and the natural world as opposing what she calls the 'cultured world'. In the authorial task of creating a sustainable way of life for all inhabitants on earth, she uses animal creatures to challenge both the ideological assumptions and the hierarchical structures of power and domination that together serve to hold the majority of earth's inhabitants subordinated to the privileged minority and, as pointed out by Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminists seek to articulate this challenge" (Gaard 10).

### **3. Animal creatures in Antía Otero's *O cuarto das abellas***

Antía Otero is a Galician poet born in A Estrada in 1982. Her first poetry book, *De porta un horizonte* (2003), won the VII Certame Francisco Añón in 2003 and, in the same year, she also published *O son da xordeira*. *(Retro)visor* was released seven years later, in 2010, and in 2016 she was awarded the Xerais prize for *O cuarto das abellas*, the poetry collection that I intend to analyse in this chapter. The book *O cuarto das abellas* deals with the dichotomy between the savage and the domestic and contains a substantial charge

of symbolism through the introduction of animal creatures, particularly bees. Furthermore, Otero's poems are susceptible to analysis in terms of ecofeminism and post-pastoralism, yet applied to a Galician context. In particular, the aim of this chapter is to examine the function of animal creatures in the task of transforming the damaged rural areas of Galiza, including the role of women as othered subjects.

### **3.1 Galiza and the post-pastoral**

Nature is an essential element in the Galician literary imaginary, and the relation with the natural world is an argument that has been historically present in Galician literature. In the same way that Ireland as an Arcadia was fundamental to construct Irish national discourse, nature and Galician landscape helped to conform its national identity. However, despite Otero's treatment of the countryside in *O cuarto das abellas*, she introduces a new perspective that moves away from a pastoral and idealized notion of the natural world. In fact, the poetry collection may be framed within post-pastoralism.

The notion of the post-pastoral was offered by Tery Gifford in 1994 to face the need for a term to write about nature that exceeded the closed circle of the pastoral. The author defines post-pastoral literature as a type of writing about the countryside that accepts the "responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas" (Gifford 6) and recognizes that the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by "the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources" (Gifford 6).

In the particular case of Galiza, the natural world had a dual consideration: on the one hand, it was the Arcadia that helped to conform a national identity and, on the other hand, it would work as a mechanism to link Galiza to poverty and backwardness. María Reimóndez, in her article "The Rural, Urban and Global Spaces of Galician Culture", has

defined Galiza as “a fragmented and contested territory which, until the 1980s, was basically rural and still characterized on many levels by pre-industrial economic practises and values” (Reimóndez 157). Nevertheless, the process of urbanization in a traditionally rural society was rapid and the situation has been dramatically transformed. Yet the Galician demographic landscape is still described from an urbanized perspective, the rural areas remain associated with “a lower quality of life, an aging population and higher unemployment rates” (Reimóndez 159). Therefore, and despite the remarkable economic and social changes over the last fifty years, Galiza is still represented as the epitome of rurality.

### **3.1.1 Rurality in the Galician literary imaginary**

The emergence of a national identity discourse based on a shared sense of undeniably rural roots harks back to the second half of the nineteenth century and the Galician literary revival of the *Rexurdimento* (in Miguélez-Carballeira 158). Subsequent generations of nationalist thinkers have continued to return to embellish the idea of Galicia’s rural essence with works such as Vicente Risco’s *Etnografía* (1962) and many others by the intellectuals of the *Nos Generation*. According to the Galician cultural historian Anton Figueroa, “the rural world became a source for every kind of story, and these stories fulfilled the political and rhetorical function of legitimizing the nation” (Figueroa 46-7).

Literature, as an engaged instrument to contest Galiza’s oppression in economic and cultural terms, tended to construct a literary image marked by the idealization of nature and the nostalgia. Nonetheless, after Francos’ regime, the Galician literary imaginary needed to escape rural restraints and incorporate signs of modernization. As María Sánchez explains:

unha das marcas que caracterizan a concepción actual da paisaxe procedería dese desexo de incorporar o urbano no discurso literario galego como marca de modernización. (In Villalba 118)

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the Galician writer María Xosé Queizán who denies any type of natural idealization, introducing the urban context in the literary discourse and thus opting for modernization as a necessity for both the society and literary imaginary. In this respect, Villalba argues that Queizán:

arremete contra a idea da natureza como destino fatal, contra o idealismo e o platonismo, criticando o «natural» como característica ontolóxica e considerando a valoración das diferenzas como consolo fronte á carencia de poder. A súa é unha clara posición antinaturalista e unha decidida aposta pola ciencia como espazo de liberdade. (Villalba 121)

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, urbanization in Galiza had a rapid and even uncontrolled development, thus creating an abandonment of rural areas, both including the abandonment by people who migrated to urban areas and the abandonment of investment and preservation policies.

*O cuarto das abellas* deals with the precariousness and the degradation of the rural world caused by the “mal desenvolvemento en nome dos intereses occidentais, que está detrás da contaminación, do acaparamento de terras e da destrución dos sistemas alimentarios locais” (Villalba 116). Literary discourse will thus be affected by this deterioration of the environment and, while the pastoral celebrated the human exploitation of the gift of nature, post-pastoral writers start to recognize the dangers of a complacent view of our fragile relationship with nature.

### **3.1.2 An approach to ecofeminism in the Galician rural context**

According to Gifford, the post-pastoral (apart from the abandonment and degradation of the environment) includes “the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources”. Hence, considering the connection that ecofeminists assert exists between women and nature, I will examine here women’s

role in the rural world, particularly in a Galician context and in the Galician literary imaginary.

As mentioned in the former chapter, ecofeminism recognises the existence of a profound bond between women and nature and may be defined, according to Villalba, as “unha ética comprometida coa desxerarquización do mundo, denunciando unha concepción androcéntrica e loitando contra o fundamento do dominio sobre a natureza e sobre as mulleres simultaneamente” (Villalba 115). As an interdisciplinary theory that aims to condemn all social ways of oppression, ecofeminism’s main objective is to reject neo-liberal patriarchal discourse by empowering women and defending nature. In order to create a sustainable world and therefore improve the social well-being of populations, it may be necessary to consider ecofeminist theories, as they imply a rational use of natural resources and the construction of societies that do not include any kind of oppression. In this respect, Cabrera Duarte argues that:

El ecofeminismo al fomentar el empoderamiento de las mujeres y la defensa de la naturaleza, se convierte en un movimiento vital para impulsar el desarrollo rural sostenible, debido a los puntos de coincidencia que existen entre ambos; ya que este último busca el mejoramiento integral del bienestar social de la población que habita en las zonas no urbanas. Lo que implica prestarle atención al uso racional de los recursos naturales y a la construcción de sociedades que sean capaces de eliminar toda forma de opresión que esté presente o pueda surgir entre hombres y mujeres. (Cabrera 13)

In traditionally rural societies as Galiza, the role of women in this context is an essential task for ecofeminism. As rural communities do not have “la variedad de actores sociales ni la diversidad cultural que existe en las ciudades”, they are defined as spaces with their own particularities, usually marked by homogeneous cultures “arraigadas en usos y costumbres que han sido transmitidos de generación en generación y una mayor vinculación con la naturaleza” (Cabrera 16). In those rural contexts, women have been associated with reproductive tasks related to the land or to the care of children or elderly



people. As Alicia H. Puleo explains, women's relationship with nature, their restriction to the private sphere and to attitudes of affectivity excludes them from the field of reason and culture:

Ser ecofeminista non implica afirmar que as mulleres estean de xeito innato mais ligadas á Natureza e á vida que os homes (...) O colectivo feminino foi tradicionalmente responsable das tarefas do coidado da vida máis fráxil (nenos/as, maiores, e persoas enfermas) e do mantemento da infraestrutura material doméstica (cociña, roupa...), desenvolvemento en termos estadísticos, unha subxetividade relacional, atenta aos demais e con maior expresión da afetividade. (In Villalba 115)

Therefore, men are “quien toma las decisiones en el interior de la familia y la representa a nivel comunitario.” (Cabrera 14) while women, despite their active role in the maintenance and survival of the family structure and well-being, are considered as ‘unprofitable’ for a liberal and patriarchal development. As argued by Shiva:

El ecofeminismo es de gran utilidad para impulsar el desarrollo rural sostenible, debido a que revalora la importancia que tiene la mujer y la naturaleza que trabajan para producir y reproducir la vida [y que] son declaradas improductivas en el modelo de desarrollo liberal patriarcal. (In Cabrera 16)

Hence, this explains the precariousness of women in rural contexts. Despite the fact that they may be considered as custodians of the collective memory, having an essential role in the conservation of biodiversity, other people's caring as well as their relation to the alimentary production and “outros bens directamente relacionados coa supervivencia da comunidade ou os recursos públicos” (Villalba 115), their unproductiveness is asserted by neo-liberal patriarchal discourse.

However, the twentieth century has brought about a growing awareness of the existence of different social symbolical systems based on hierarchical relations of gender. The first author who used the term ecofeminism was Françoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, and in 1980 one of the main theorists of ecofeminist, Ynestra King, organized what can be considered the first ecofeminist conference (Villalba 114). It was thus at the end of the

twentieth century when ecofeminist movements emerged, including women from the rural context, whose objective was, not to deny their connection with the natural world to which they belong and where they work, but to de-hierarchize patriarchal and androcentric human relations. As Victoria Camps explains to vindicate the valorization of women's work in rural contexts: "non se trataría de descubrir o especificamente feminino, senón aquilo que non foi pensado, descuberto e recoñecido como valioso cando de feito o é" (in Villalba 115).

### **3.1.3 Women from the rural world in the Galician literary imaginary**

As a consequence of different social and symbolic systems, hierarchical relations have confined women to a private sphere and denied them any kind of participation in public spaces. Literature, as a cultural activity, belonged to a public sphere that women, unable (because of patriarchal neoliberal ideologies) to produce symbolic or valuable work, could not enter. Therefore, until the twentieth century, literature written by women was not conceived to contribute to define a national literature. For that matter, Figueroa argues how women's literary production was not symbolic:

O que fan (os parnasos nacionais) é construír dende o poder o referente dun país onde só os homes libres teñen dereito á produción simbólica, onde as mulleres, (...) non o son de xeito pleno (...) Así, as escrituras que se producen neste tempo non están destinadas para todo o mundo, como hoxe se puidese entender, polo contrario, están referidas a unha elite de homes que manexarán a nación. (In Villalba 120)

However, coinciding with the emergence of ecofeminist theories in Europe, at the end of the twentieth century, new voices arose vindicating a culture based on the inclusion of women and diversity. Regarding this, Kirsty Hooper mentions three stages marked by the presence of women in Galiza: the first one with Rosalía de Castro in 1880, the second one with Francisca Herrero Garrido in 1920 and a last one marked by the presence of María Xosé Queizán in 1965 (in Villalba 120). Those new systems involved the inclusion of a plurality of signs and subjects and, consequently, new collectives demanded new

necessities and communal rights. María Xosé Queizán was one of the first voices who rejected idealistic views of nature and thus its bond with women. As mentioned above, she has a clear anti-naturalist position, and a literary production marked by the introduction of urban elements. Consequently, she rejects women's confinement to private rural spheres and her writing tends to create a new literary imaginary that does not include the notion of Galiza as a country related to rurality and backwardness only. For her, the rural world represents oppression whilst science and the urban would function as spaces for freedom and progress.

In Galiza, the incorporation of urban elements was a strategy in order to deal with the question of modernity and the movements of migration from rural spaces to cities. Therefore, concerning literature, a new imaginary was created where nature is not the only and basic element to define identity. As Villalba argues: “Aparece un imaxinario renovado en que predominan elementos inventados, híbridos, fronteirizos e alleos fronte aos elementos da paisaxe propia” (Villalba 125).

Nowadays, in many literary works, landscape and the natural world still appear as central elements for Galician national identity. However, as is the case of Olga Novo, Chus Pato, Medos Romero or Ana Romaní, the treatment of the natural world and the role of women in it is exploring new perspectives that move towards the post-pastoral tendency:

A paisaxe e o medio rural continúan a estar moi presentes no imaxinario literario actual e existe un bo número de creadoras que reflicten nas súas obras a problemática dunha modernidade que chegou da man da destrución da natureza, da perda dunha gran riqueza cultural e lingüística, e que discrimina máis da metade da humanidade, polo feito de sermos mulleres. Os feminismos incorporan análises críticas e propostas que inclúen todos os niveis de desigualdade existentes. (Villalba 126)

Another clear example of those new tendencies is the poetry collection *O Cuartos das Abellas*. Despite the fact that the author provides a negative and aggressive vision of the rural world, her intention is to portrait reality. Otero does not present an idealized view of rural life, but she is intent on criticizing the loss of rural spaces and traditions. She is also specially interested in the bonds between women and animals.

### **3.2 An analysis of animal creatures in Antía Otero's *O cuarto das abellas*.**

Following Gifford's aforementioned definition of the post-pastoral as the recognition of the awareness about "responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas" (Gifford 6) along with the "the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources" (Gifford 6), we could affirm that Otero's poetry collection may be studied in terms of post-pastoralism. In the Galician context, the reality of the rural world, since it has been exposed to abandonment in demographic and economic terms, in favour of industrialization and urbanization, is nowadays a violent one, especially for women. In *O cuarto das abellas*, Otero portrays Galician rural life as a violent context damaged by capitalist and anthropocentric ideologies. She also denounces the precariousness of the women who work and live in it through the symbolical appearance of bees.

Agents from nature, bees in this case, are fundamental figures in order to interpret Otero's book. Those animal creatures have a high symbolical value as they represent diligence, effort and effective organization in terms of work. According to Juan Eduardo Crilot:

En el lenguaje jeroglífico egipcio, el signo de la abeja entraba como determinativo de los nombres reales (...) por las ideas de laboriosidad, creación y riqueza que derivan de la producción de la miel. En Grecia, constituyó el emblema del trabajo y de la obediencia. (...) En el simbolismo cristiano, particularmente ente durante el período románico, simbolizaron la diligencia y la elocuencia. (Crilot 64)

Apart from the symbolism related to work and the production of honey, bees can also represent matriarchy (Crilot 64), especially through the figure of the queen bee. Those animals' hierarchy, having a female figure in a high position in terms of social organization, may thus be a suitable metaphor for ecofeminism as working in nature and the production of honey may resemble the work of women in rural contexts, always portrayed as hard and diligent, though devaluated by patriarchal judgments. Therefore, understood as symbols for matriarchy, bees may be used, as is the case of *O cuarto das abellas*, in order to give women the voice that patriarchy has denied them.

*O cuarto das abellas* is divided into five parts: 'Abellariza', 'Melisa', 'Formalina', 'Obreiras' and 'A Esmelga'. In 'Abellariza', the author deals with the dichotomy between the wild and the domestic and the *abellariza* itself, the place where bees dwell, is presented as a dual location.

On the one hand, it represents a place of oppression, the domestic and private sphere to which women have been confined. As Otero cites, from Frank Kafka at the beginning of the book, the *abellariza* functions as a "gaiola baleira" where "a fermosa / fera (...) Nin sequera semellaba / botar en falta a liberdade" (in Otero 14), thus referring to women's lack of freedom and resignation to this situation in the domestic sphere.

In the first poem, Otero deals with the loss of tradition and the abandonment of the Galician rural world, mentioning the introduction of modernity as in the poem 'Antes' (15): "vendido o gando / puxeron a calefacción" (15). A recurrent device in *O cuarto das abellas* is the use of instruments, settings and naming activities that can be related to Galician rurality, most of them associated with the domestic and with feminine activities. In 'Cedo' (16), a female character wakes up "no bruar das vacas", runs "coas botas de goma / ata o furgón do pan", "deterxentes" and "potas granates" appear and soap is "listo

nas palmas” (29) as instruments belonging to women’s daily life. In addition, ‘Habitar pequenos cuartos’ (21) describes a domestic situation where women walk “co paquete de castañas no peto” and “debullando millo”, in ‘Nos baños dos bares’ (24) a woman turns up “en bata e zapatillas”, and in ‘-Escoita-’ the background is the “zunido en bis / das picadoras de cebola” (24-25). Thus, coinciding with the aforementioned association of women with the private domestic sphere, the activities performed by women in *O cuarto das abellas* are associated with food production and the maintenance of the house.

On the other hand, apart from the *abellariza* representing the house, the domestic, the space for women’s confinement and oppression, it may also be a place for liberation. Otero makes use of this dual meaning by introducing violent scenes inside the house. This is her way to reverse the patriarchal assumption of resigned and silenced women who work at home and maintain the family structure. In ‘Cedo’ (16) the woman is holding a knife and in ‘Bater na tarde’ (18) the subject wants to “romper as ás / os dentes / encher de sangue / o vidro”. There is also a short poem named ‘As casas deixan cicatrices’ (22) (“*As casas deixan cicatrices<sup>4</sup> / (às veces invisibles) / pero queiman*”) where the author may directly refer to the house as a place of oppression, that violently ‘burns’, where women are resigned and invisible subjects that end up with scars. One may, therefore, interpret that the dichotomy between the wild and the domestic by relating the domestic with oppression and, conversely, the wild with liberation.

The second part, ‘Melisa’, starts with a poem that also includes violent episodes, this time related to hysteria. As explained by Tania Woods, there existed in Western modern times a tendency to link women to a deviant behaviour and were considered as uncontrolled and mad subjects:

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<sup>4</sup> The emphasis appears in *O cuarto da abellas*’ first edition, edited by Xerais in 2016.

The construct of women as “deviant” has a long history. It can be seen in the world’s major religions and spiritual traditions, which often view women as “uncontrollable”. In particular, the last two centuries have seen a greater interconnectedness between the concept of femininity and the cultural construction of madness. (Woods 1)

Therefore, as those women who diverge from patriarchal discourse were considered as mentally ill, Otero in this poem writes that “Non tentarei mostrar que é difícil collerme / Non tentarei mostrar a falta de cordura” (1-2). Moreover, included in the violent and thus deviating attitudes of women in the poetry collection, are some sexual and intimate episodes, where women try to overcome patriarchal impositions by being violent and by claiming their sexuality, thus affirming their identity as women. Once again, the poem ‘-Escoita-’ (37) includes various lines that describe an episode of masturbation: “pero eu como o exército / gusto do porno / gozo o instante / onde saciarme / de vaselina / unllas / cadeas de ouro sobre os sofás de sky”.

Consequently, we may interpret that Otero’s use of violence portrays both the strength of women and the violence that Galician rurality implies: nature is not an ideal place but an abandoned and damaged context.

The last poem of ‘Melisa’ starts with the death of a queen, maybe referring to the queen bee and thus a metaphor for the death of a woman: “O día / que a raíña morreu” (39). The poem talks about the legacy left by a woman after death, referred by the poetic persona as a defeat, the poem ends: “A guerra por habitar / O subtexto / a referencia / -ese saber- / que existiches / alén da derrota”. This second part finishes with what may be a woman defeated by routine and the devalued work of a lifetime. ‘Formalina’ the third part, keeps describing women’s routine in various violent ways. In ‘Son os abázcaros’, there is a reference to the work of sewing, traditionally related to women.

It is not until the fourth part, ‘Obreiras’, that bees come as agents to transform women’s defeat. As symbols of matriarchy and diligence, those animal creatures work

for the defeat of patriarchal structures and androcentric practices with the natural world. ‘Obreiras’ starts with a powerful poem that, through the figure of bees and with the hive representing the collective, may intend to assert that women will not succumb to patriarchal impositions, aesthetic ones in this case: “**Na colmea** / As abellas nunca teremos / Cintura de avespa” (61). In the poem ‘Matronas Reveladas’ (62) Otero alludes to some female figures as goddesses or virgins, women that have been an inspiration for some men that belong to the cultural and artistic canon, such as Rubens, Klimt, Velázquez or Neruda. There are in those allusions some intermingled verses describing clear types of patriarchal oppression, again associated with marriage and domestic work: “Vellas fritindo ovos / Anxos do fogar / Esposas fieis (...) Escravas nos botes de Cola Cao” (10-18). However, the poem ends with a message of community and empowerment: “mais na colmea / non hai forno / grande dabondo para cociñala / nin mesa que non rompa / do peso do festín” (31-35). The hive is thus a communal space of liberation, treated in the collection as a place of reunion where bees (or women) work together for transformation. Group organization, the way bees work to produce their honey may be a metaphor for the work of women in rural contexts, also working for the sustainability of the community. The hive as liberation is also described in the poem ‘No enxame’ (64): “No enxame / as abellas / beben / tequila / cando non hai fútbol na tele / falan e silencian” (1-6) and finally / cospen / desatan a acción das ninguén / e sorpréndense”. Here bees, or women, show an attitude that has been typically associated with men’s behaviour, such as drinking alcohol, watching football or the act of spitting, thus frustrating patriarchal expectations.

Furthermore, there is in this poem an allusion to bees’ wings, a recurrent element in the poetry collection. Bees, probably as an act of liberation, are constantly moving their wings and pushing them against items that oppress them. In ‘No enxame’ bees “moven as ás / petando na mesa” (64), in ‘Revogar a Raiña’ (65), a way to kill a bee may be



“Rebentarlle as ás / contra os cortizos” (10-11). In addition, in the first part ‘Abellariza’, a way to free the bees is to “Bater na tarde / ou nun cristal / romper as ás / os dentes / encher de sangue / o vidro” (18). There is in this poem another allusion to a violent way to achieve freedom, with blood and broken wings.

As Fran P. Lorenzo has suggested: “A autora, entre un enxame de obreiras, adéntrase na liguaxe e comparte connosco o seu fermoso acto de risco, o perigo-mel duns versos que, como o veneno das abellas, proen e sandan à vez” (in Otero 2017). In *O cuarto das abellas*, Antía Otero deals with the dichotomy between the wild and the domestic portraying the violent reality of the rural Galician world. Bees will thus serve as symbols to represent and free women from the oppression that this context implies. The book offers a harsh yet real vision of a natural world that needs to be changed, and bees may function as a metaphor to give a voice to subjects that live and work in it.

#### **4. A comparison of Grace Wells’ and Antia Otero’s poetry**

##### **4.1 Nature in Irish and Galician literary traditions: convergences and divergences**

This chapter is devoted to the comparison of Wells’ and Otero’s use of animal creatures, considering the similarities of the Irish and Galician literary tradition. The social and historical context of those Atlantic communities have had a parallel development and, as a consequence, their literatures have shaped a number of natural features as icons of national identity (Palacios and Nogueira 185). Bucolic representations of the landscape were and are still frequent in Ireland and Galiza, constantly depicted as Arcadias and thus immersed in a pastoral tradition exemplified, in the case of Ireland, by W.B. Yeats, and in the case of Galiza, by Otero Pedrayo. Moreover, María López Sánchez refers to the *Rexurdimento*, a literary revival movement in Galiza that privileged natural landscapes over urban ones, as the latter were heterogeneous cityscapes favourable to identity

dissolution. Irish nationalism, for its part, “situated the essence of Irishness in the rural west of the country, a region less susceptible to the influence of British colonization” (in Palacios and Nogueira 186).

However, in view of the fact that landscape changes for a series of reasons such as economic or environmental ones, the main objective of ecocriticism is to question and to analyse how writers respond to those changes undergone by nature. To this effect, a curious thing about literary images is that they prevail although reality changes. As Palacios and Nogueira argue, they are “so powerful that they persist in the readers’ imagination long after their extra-linguistic referent has ceased to exist” (185). Therefore, ecocriticism asks: what happens when environmental degradation affects the self-image that literary tradition has created?

The comparative ecocritical studies of Galicia and Ireland began in 2005, and the intention was to examine the responses that new emergent voices gave, especially women, in the face of the degradation of nature in two communities whose literary imaginaries had historically depicted them as Arcadias. These new writers can be considered as forming part of *emergent literatures*, a concept that arose during the last decades of the twentieth century as a consequence, according to Mendoça,

das chamadas teorias pós-coloniais e alargou-se, por influência da poderosa academia norte-americana, tanto às denominadas literaturas de minorias (étnicas, de género, de orientação sexual), como às literaturas formadas no interior dos processos de colonização e descolonização. (Mendoça)

As an emergent discourse produced by minority groups, ecocritical awareness in feminist literary theory “intends to respond the growing presence of environmental creative writing since 1970” (Gaard and Murphy 5). The alternative discourse that ecocriticism and ecofeminism have created interrogates literary tradition and, in the particular case of Ireland and Galiza, highlights the following aspects:

the rise of ecological awareness, alongside the unprecedented upsurge of women writers in Ireland and Galicia since the 1980, has generated new literary repertoires and tropes that attempt to dismantle the androcentric and anthropocentric bias of Western civilization. Our argument, then, is in line with that proposed by the editors of this volume in their introduction when they construe “emergence” as the transformation of a literary field by the discourses of previously submerged or suppressed groups or ideologies. (Palacios and Nogueira 189)

Since the 1970s, literary systems of Galiza and Ireland have undergone a number of changes, probably motivated by women’s access to university and their participation in the public sphere of literature. New women writers in both communities made new configurations of nature, challenging the pastoral tradition and utilitarian considerations of nature as a symbol of national identity.

Nonetheless, the comparison between these Atlantic communities is not exclusively based on similarities. On the basis of some historical and social coincidences, it is also important to detect differences in order to understand the various developments of the literary productions in these two Atlantic communities. In this sense, Palacios and Nogueira mention three possible reactions to the degradation of the environment and the simultaneous oppression of nature and women. The first one consists in ignoring the problem. This attitude may be motivated by reluctance, especially in the case of Ireland, to complain about the consequences of progress. As for this, Palacios and Nogueira refer to Kerry Hardie’s opinion that “after the famines and the extreme poverty that forced millions to emigration, a relative amount of environmental damage is a fair price to pay for the progress and comforts brought by the economic growth of the 1990s” (Palacios and Nogueira 186). If we look at the poetic texts engaged in the representation or denunciation of nature’s damage, one will conclude that this attitude is more common in Ireland. In Galiza, however, the Prestige oil spillage of November 2002 caused such environmental and economic damage that it provoked the implication of artists and the mobilization of the population against the mismanagement of the disaster.

Apart from ignorance, another possible attitude is to react and to commit to the denunciation of nature's damage. In this respect, Palacios and Nogueira argue that despite the fact that the "parallel study of the Galician and Irish literary fields leads us to believe that the contemporary production of ecocritical poetry in Ireland is, comparatively speaking, still sparse" (186), Jody Allen Randolph identifies in the works of Paula Meehan and Eavan Boland and in earlier writers such as O. Goldsmith and P. Kavanagh some signs that prefigure ecocriticism (186).

A third type of attitude would consist in the elegy, that is, idealizing a bucolic past and complaining about the current environmental crisis. However, there exists another attitude, probably the most suitable one for the analysis of Wells' and Otero's poetry and characteristic of ecofeminism. It is an interrogative position that calls into question both the cultural doxa and its current practices, thus questioning the spaces and roles assigned to women by nationalist and Catholic institutions. Therefore, this interrogation includes the experience of women writers that have been excluded from past literary representations (Palacios and Nogueira 187). How could these writers elegize a past world and culture which has marginalized them? The next section will provide two different responses to this question through the usage of animal creatures in the works of two women poets.

#### **4.2 Animal creatures in Grace Wells' and Antía Otero's poetry: a comparison**

The aim of this section is to compare Otero's and Wells' use of animal creatures in the belief that the emergence of Irish and Galician women poets in the last three decades, together with the increasing ecological awareness and the introduction of ecocriticism, may generate responses to the current environmental crisis that differ from the idealized and elegiac consideration of nature. However, as the aim of ecofeminism is not only to

find similarities but also differences and contradictions, it is important to examine Wells' and Otero's different perspectives. Although both authors may be framed within post-pastoralism, they make different configurations of nature when responding to its degradation and to its bond with women's oppression.

For her part, by using eco-poetry, Grace Wells denounces the degradation of the landscape, portraying nature as a refugee, a way out of the heterogeneous cityscape that dilutes identity. As women subjects, othered by Christian and patriarchal discourse, Wells' poetic voices find themselves in the woods and shape their identity in the natural world. Nevertheless, despite being described as a refugee, nature is not idealized. Her position is, from my point of view, an interesting and different one: while anthropocentric and utilitarian practices have denatured the human world and have damaged the landscape, Wells describes the landscape as a necessary element for humans.

Moreover, we have seen that Wells' poetry is marked by a dark and mythical atmosphere and nature is also depicted as a sanctuary for the characters. With this dark atmosphere, she achieves to make a strong critique of the degradation of nature and of the violence to which it is exposed. In addition, the mythical tone and the supernatural (or even religious) forces may be used by Wells as a way to empower nature, to provide it with a voice. In fact, as in the poem 'The Black Shoes' (Wells 2015: 57), for Wells nature is a speaking entity: 'the earth is in trouble / I hear her voice through the soles of my feet // she wants to ask why is it you came now / what is it you have to offer' (58). In this sense the ecocritical and post-pastoral outlook it is perceptible here. Manuela Palacios explains that the object of ecocriticism is to realize that nature is sending messages to us (e.g. climate change) that we are actually ignoring (Palacios).

Otherwise, Otero does not present in her poems subjects escaping urban landscapes but rural ones. Also framed within the post-pastoral tradition, her poetry denies the idealized image of nature as a postcard that does not correspond to reality. In *O cuarto das abellas*, she portrays the reality of Galician rurality and, to do so, Otero uses violent images, thus rendering the damaged and abandoned natural world, alongside with the way it affects the subjects, women in this case, that inhabit rural areas in Galiza. Thus, if one of the aforementioned attitudes in the face of nature's degradation was to ignore it due to the fear of complaining about the consequences of progress, Otero goes against this attitude. She does not blame progress, but as she aims to portray reality and to dismantle idealization, she necessarily alludes to progress as the cause of the damage or abandonment of the rural world. However, her solution is not to idealize the past, the third attitude mentioned previously, but to accept a damaged reality and search for some remedies to transform it.

Although Wells produces an ecofeminist critique and renders nature as a place to achieve freedom, nature in Otero is a place of oppression for women subjects. Even so, it is important to notice that nature may not be a negative element. However, its negative connotations are produced by the damage, abandonment and loss of tradition of the Galician rural context, motivated by anthropocentric and patriarchal practices. Therefore, Wells poetry may seem to approach a pastoral tradition as it presents nature as the *right* place to stay in, while Otero's perspective is that of a damaged and thus aggressive natural world. Nevertheless, both configurations may be understood from an ecofeminist perspective that, by using different strategies, shapes a critique to Western attitudes towards nature and women.

After pointing out some divergences concerning the different configurations of nature in Otero and Wells, it is also fundamental to examine the similarities, that in this

case are represented by the introduction of a new symbolism: animal creatures. In Otero's *O cuarto das abellas* and in Wells' *When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things* and *Fur*, animal creatures have an allegorical function, either feminist or ecological. They represent, from my point of view, a positive aspect amidst the dark or violent atmospheres that the collections picture. They choose various small animals, bees in Otero's poems, as subjects with the fundamental task of transformation, that is, of ending up the simultaneous othering of women and nature. Probably, small animals may represent a subtle way of performing transformation, by standing for the silenced voices of nature and woman. In addition, their small size may refer to the apparent invisibility of those othered subjects. However, bees, as symbols for matriarchy and endurance and, in Wells' poems, creatures bringing messages (Wells 2015: 34) or whispering in a subtle way to perform amelioration (38) have an active role for ecofeminists purposes, and their work, as mentioned in the first chapter, may be subtle, but accumulative and finally effective.

Finally, although poetry about the degradation of nature is "for the time being, larger and more incisive in Galicia though recent poetry collections in Ireland also show signals of growing preoccupation" (Palacios and Nogueira 202) Antía Otero and Grace Wells are two examples of those emergent women writers that explicitly link the oppression of women to the degradation of the environment. Responding to androcentric appropriations of nature, both authors refuse to idealize past landscapes, thus questioning their literary tradition, the way art manipulates nature, and their own poetic role (Palacios and Nogueira 202). Animal creatures are, then, the subjects in charge of transforming the power structures that have othered women and nature. Therefore, their symbolism is a powerful one and, it may be asserted, a new way of ecofeminist critique common to these two socially and historically related communities: Ireland and Galiza.

## 5. Conclusion

On the basis of ecofeminism, the initial purpose of this dissertation was to examine the role of animal creatures in Grace Wells and Antía Otero's poetry, two authors that may be included in the post-pastoral literary movement. The aim of the comparison of their poetry collections was to seek for convergences and divergences in the work of two female voices that make new configurations of nature in two communities that have had a parallel development in social, literary and historical terms.

Both authors use small animals in their poems. In the case of Wells, several types of animals appear in her compositions and Otero makes use of bees as agents from nature rendered as guides to perform transformation, "the single term to which all adherents of ecofeminism would assent" (Gaard & Murphy 3). In *Fur* and *When God Has Been Called Away to Greater Things*, the poetic personae or characters are women whose aim is to liberate themselves from patriarchal practices. As in 'Achill', they achieve freedom in nature, or, as in 'Vixen' (Wells 2015: 15), 'Selkie Moment' (18), 'What Have They Done to Kilkenny' (23) or 'Summer' (25), animal creatures appear as messengers of endurance, hope and creativity or direct guides for women, like in 'Like Persephone Emerging from the Underworld' (32) or 'Otter'. Moreover, as is the case of those poems, the task of transformation usually implies dark or wild contexts, procedures or destinies.

Darkness and wilderness are elements shared by Wells and Otero. In *O cuarto das abellas*, bees, symbols for endurance and matriarchy, are used as metaphors that represent the role of women in the Galician rural world. The hive functions as a symbol of women's unity and bees' production, described by Fran P. Lorenzo as the 'perigo-mel' (Otero 2016) also suggests the danger of the silenced work of bees/women in the domestic context to which they have been confined. Furthermore, the house, along with the rural



context, is the place of oppression. It is in those spaces where violent or even erotic scenes occur, as in ‘–Escoita–’ (37) or ‘Se me deses as túas unllas’ (47), thus portraying the violence of the damaged and abandoned landscape and the oppression of women living in those contexts.

Therefore, Wells and Otero’s usage of animal creatures in wild or violent atmospheres is a way to diverge from the behaviour that patriarchal society expects expect from women, conquering the aspect which has been negated to them. The patriarchal consideration of women as sexually voracious and irrational subjects is also challenged with the inclusion of those erotic scenes and the appropriation of wilderness as an atypical attitude and place for women alludes to the necessity to re-affirming their subjectivity.

In two communities historically marked by the pastoral tradition and their consideration as Arcadias, the emergence of women writers as Grace Wells and Antía Otero represents two new ways of facing the ongoing environmental crisis. Though Wells presents nature as a space for freedom and Otero as an oppressive space for women, both configurations of the landscape denounce the degradation or abandonment of the environment and the way in which it affects humans. Animal creatures, then, function in *Fur, When God Has Been Called Away To Greater Things* and *O cuarto das abellas* as agents of freedom and transformation of perception, challenging both the ideological assumptions and the hierarchical structures of power that prevail in Western societies.

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